

Kingdom of the Outlands
Queen's Prize; March 2021

Artisan's Name: Guinevere inghean Ui Áinle, Shire of Nahrun Kabirun; Jennifer Gabel

Title of Project: Long Live the Queen; An Intarsia Project

Category: Try Something New: Woodworking/Intarsia

Historical Basis:

Before we can discuss the historical basis of this project, we first have to define intarsia. It is often confused with other similar techniques, such as inlay, marquetry, and to a lesser degree, carving. In fact, intarsia is often considered the forebearer of inlay and marquetry and the terms are often used interchangeably. Encyclopedia Britannica describes **inlay** as “any [decorative](#) technique used to create an ornamental design, pattern, or scene by inserting or setting into a shallow or depressed ground or surface a material of a different colour or type.”¹ In **Marquetry**, “thin sheets of [wood](#), metal, or organic material, such as shell or mother-of-pearl, cut into intricate patterns according to a preconceived design and affixed to the flat surfaces of [furniture](#).”² With **carving**, “Whatever material is used, the essential features of the direct method of carving are the same; the sculptor starts with a solid mass of material and reduces it systematically to the desired form.”³

By contrast, Intarsia uses various species of wood, glued together, to build up the design. The design can then be added to furniture or panels. “**Intarsia**, Form of [wood inlay](#). Italian intarsia, or inlaid [mosaic](#) of wood, which probably derived from East Asian ivory and wood inlay, found its richest expression during the Renaissance in Italy (c. 1400–1600). It was often used in panels over the backs of choir stalls and in private studies and chapels of princes.”⁴

While the details may appear as carvings, they are actually intarsia. The difference being intarsia is attached to a wood base where carvings are extracted from a single piece of wood.



Credenza, circa 1440 – 1450
Metropolitan Museum



Figure intarsia from the Sacristy of the Cathedral, Florence.
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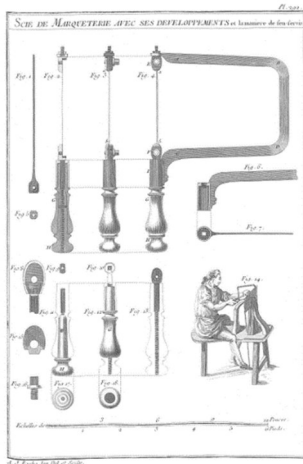
Siena, Italy is considered the birthplace of intarsia. As many as 34 workshops specializing in intarsia existed in Florence. Because intarsia was so expensive and time consuming to complete, many artisans also had to supplement their income with other techniques. The expense of hard woods also led to the art of inlay and marquetry as thinner veneers were used. Often thought to be widely popular in the 15th & 16th centuries, there is evidence of intarsia as early as 1259⁵. Domenico di Nicolo (1342 – 1453) was a master and most famous intarsia artisan. He worked for 13 years on the chapel in the Palazzo Pubblico at Siena and the doors of the Sala di Balia.⁶



<https://www.farsettiarte.it/it/asta-0187-1/domenico-di-nicolo-detto-domenico-dei-cori-ver.asp>

Tools & Materials:

In period, artisans would have cut their intarsia pieces using a fret saw. Fret saws are similar to modern coping saws but with larger throats and finer blades⁷.



Engraving by [André Jacob Roubo](#) from
encyclopaedia *L'Art du Menuisier* (1769)
"[marquetry saw](#)"; aka fret saw

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For my first attempt at intarsia, I chose to not use a fret saw since I have back issues that would have made using hand tools difficult for sustained periods of time. Instead, the primary tools used included a scroll saw and multiple sanders.

The advantage of intarsia is it is a great way to use wood scraps left over from other projects. The materials used in my project included a variety of woods.

- Birch – wing framework
- Black Walnut – body
- Mahogany – small dots on wings
- Spalted Poplar – large wing segments. The black streaks in the poplar are caused by a fungus, rendering the wood unsuitable for structural work but beautiful for detailed work like intarsia

Procedure:

In making my first intarsia project, I learned by my mistakes, which I hope not to repeat next time. The project begins by choosing a pattern. I chose Her Majesty's butterfly charge. I enlarged the butterfly to make a pattern. My first mistake was choosing a pattern with very small pieces (some of the wing's dots are the size of my fingertip). This made cutting and sanding such small pieces difficult and a safety hazard. Several went flying across the workshop because I didn't have a tight enough grip on them. Not to mention the numerous manicures I received holding such small pieces to the belt sanders.

I began cutting each piece, beginning with the wing's framework. This was my second mistake. By cutting the framework first, it made fitting the wing's dots very difficult. Many attempts were made to get each dot to fit just right. Due to the small size of the dots, I cut most larger than needed and then sanded them to the proper size. In hindsight, I should have cut the small dots first. Then I could have traced them onto the wings to cut the framework.

The third mistake was in the layout of the wood pieces. I should have paid more attention to the direction of the grain prior to cutting each wing dot to ensure the grain matched the contour of the wings. This was an aesthetic flaw by an amateur but easily remedied next time.

After all pieces were cut and fitted, I then sanded each one and began the contouring. The lower wings were sanded down to give depth. The edges of the wings and body were rounded over. At first I used a sander to knock down the sharp edge. Then I used a carving tool and sandpaper to finish the round over.

Pieces were assembled using CA glue (superglue). In period, they would have been glued using hide glue.

The final step was to apply two coats of a beeswax and orange oil solution (Howard Feed-N-Wax). This will help protect the wood and gives a nice, finished look. At this stage, the piece is ready for hanging or for attaching to a camp piece, such as a bench or chest.

The project, start to finish, took 10-15 hours to complete. For a first attempt, I am happy with the overall results and look forward to improving my technique.

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